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ABSTRACT

A study investigated students' attitudes about writing, in order to gain new insights into writing apprehension. The Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test and 2 open-ended questions were administered to 202 students from public and private colleges and universities in California. Results indicated that highly apprehensive students generally want to be helped; they want to grow to be more skilled and capable. Results also indicated that the more apprehensive students actually enjoyed letter writing and other forms of personal writing more than the less apprehensive ones, suggesting that apprehensive writers should be encouraged to follow their inclinations to engage in journal writing and other forms of personal writing. It is clear from this research that it is extremely important for teachers to commit themselves to the creation and maintenance of a positive environment, and to dwell on positive aspects of virtually every student composition, emphasizing progress and the possibilities of future successes instead of reinforcing expectations of failure. Seventeen references are attached.) (PRA)

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The doubts and hesitations that so many people feel about writing—the experience that has come to be known as writing apprehension or writing anxiety—has been the subject of academic research since the late 19th century (Royce, 1898). But the pace of that research changed radically in 1975 when Daly and Miller developed and validated their 26-item questionnaire for measuring people's attitudes about writing and gauging the feelings people experience when confronted with the immediate prospect of having to write. In the intervening years from 1975 to the present the number of research studies on writing apprehension has exceeded those that were published in the first three-quarters of this century by a margin of 49 to 10—a difference of almost 500% in favor of the shorter time span.

There are a number of positive things that can be said about the studies that have been done and the related articles that have been written on the subject. Much has been learned about writing apprehension that was only intuitively felt in the past. We know many of the characteristics of apprehensive writers, and teaching techniques that can be used to reduce the stresses of writing. But there are some unfortunate aspects to the research that should also be noted.

In reading the professional literature one is struck by the number of different theories that have been advanced as explanations for writing apprehension. Robert Boice (1985) has cited 40 factors that have been written about over the years, each having been presented at some time as the definitive insight into the underlying cause of the phenomenon of writing apprehension. But instead of resolving the confusion, in some respects our increasing knowledge seems to be adding to it as the list of statistically documented research studies continues to grow.

Another point of interest is that most of the studies that have been done have followed a similar pattern. The educator or academic researcher hypothesizes some underlying causative influence that has not been the focal point of previous inquiry. A formal study then follows. This is a legitimate approach to academic research. Yet one wonders how to weigh the value of so many related and apparently overlapping, yet non-integrated findings. The educational professionals who have made these hypotheses are usually accomplished journal writers and/or teachers of writing. Although these professionals may experience some writing apprehension themselves, their anxieties have not been so severe as to dissuade them from career aspirations within the field. Yet there are many apprehensive writers who do not gravitate to career fields of this nature (Daly and Shamo, 1976). One wonders if a difference in perspective could somehow affect the insights of the researchers and the hypotheses that are advanced.

Is it possible that educators could be projecting their own experiences—or experiences they have identified with—onto the rest of the population at large? Like the blind men who each felt a different part of an elephant's anatomy and who each then insisted that the analogy he had drawn was the correct one—that the elephant was like a snake, a leaf, a tree, a wall, a rope, etc.—are educational researchers studying writing apprehension in too fragmented a way? Could this account for the extraordinary variety in the theories that have been seriously considered? Is it possible for the fragmented pieces to be woven into a composite picture? Can the Daly-Miller Test that has been proven to be so reliable (.940 after correction for attenuation with a test-retest reliability over one week of .923) in distinguishing the highly apprehensive from those who are less apprehensive be used to determine more subtle but equally important differences? Are the needs of the extremely apprehensive individual dif-

ferent from those of another who, though also highly apprehensive, experiences less stress and is much closer to being a low apprehensive? And what of the individual who falls between these two positions? What is unique about that person's needs and what can be done to ease the grip that writing apprehension has on him or her?

Method

In an attempt to answer these questions and to gain new insights into writing apprehension as students experience it, a study was conducted using the Daly-Miller writing Apprehension Test with randomly selected writing students from five different college campuses in the Southern California area. The majority of these students were fulfilling academic requirements by taking writing courses. The students were asked to complete the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test and to respond to two other open-ended questions. These questions specifically were:

"What encourages you to write and what do you think keeps you from writing?"

"What do you think could be done to make writing easier for you?"

Students were asked to avoid redundant comments such as, "I feel apprehensive because I get anxious." Otherwise they were encouraged to respond freely and openly. Every indication is that they did so. Participation in the study was voluntary but there were no refusals.

The sample population numbered 202 students drawn as indicated from the following colleges and universities:

COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY	Number of Students
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona	46
Mount San Antonio College	23
University of California-Irvine	24
University of California-Riverside	52
University of LaVerne	57

The majority of the students were under 25 years of age but there were some older students who had returned to school for personal reasons. The numbers of males and females were roughly equal. The participating colleges and universities were selected to represent a diverse range generalizable to the overall population of college writing students. The enrollments included students from several states who came from a variety of social, economic, and family backgrounds. The colleges and universities were the following:

1. California State Polytechnic University, Pomona—a public institution with an extremely diverse range of academic majors designed to prepare students for business, engineering, and agrarian careers. Located in eastern-most Los Angeles County, California, it is predominantly white but also has a substantial number of immigrants mostly from Southeast Asia. Enrollment is approximately 17,500. Middle and lower middle class clientele.
2. Mount San Antonio College—a 2-year, public, predominantly white institution evolving into a mixed racial status, that places emphasis on preparation for a wide

range of business careers. Located in a small town setting in eastern Los Angeles County, it has an enrollment of approximately 23,000. Middle and lower middle class clientele.

3. University of California-Irvine—a public, predominantly white, business, engineering, and liberal arts institution. Located in southernmost Orange County, California, in an area that has developed in less than 25 years from a rural agrarian community to a light industrial, highly urbanized, affluent community, it has an approximate enrollment of 12,000. Middle and upper middle class clientele.
4. University of California-Riverside—a public institution emphasizing the liberal arts and scientific studies, with a widely respected teacher preparation program. Located in north central Riverside County, California, it is mostly white with an approximate enrollment of 5,000. Middle class clientele.
5. University of LaVerne—a private, religious (Church of the Brethren), mixed racial (largely Armenian and Lebanese immigrants), business and liberal arts institution. Located in westernmost San Bernardino County, it has an enrollment of approximately 4,000. Middle and lower middle class clientele.

An effort was made to give the students the widest possible latitude in responding to the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test and the two open-ended questions. Students were encouraged to respond forthrightly and with candor. They were afforded complete anonymity unless they specifically chose to identify themselves on the response sheets. Only 7 of the 202 did so. There is ample evidence that individuals can "fake" measurement instruments of this nature if they choose to do so (e.g. responding so as to appear to be less apprehensive than they actually are and then indicating on the open-ended question that writing is already easy). However, there is very little evidence that people generally do attempt to give misleading responses of this nature (Nunnally, 1978). And there is a considerable evidence to the contrary (Cronbach, 1970; Nunnally, 1970).

Procedures

The range of possible outcomes on the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test is from 26 (the severest possible apprehensive score) to 130 (a score that demonstrates very little apprehension). This sample of 202 individuals ranged from 36 as the most apprehensive score to 130 as the least. Participants whose test scores total 78 or below are considered highly apprehensive.

Those whose test scores total 79 and above are less apprehensive. Daly and Miller's original validation procedure was cross checked three different ways within the original study and it has been verified several times since (Daly, 1977; Daly, 1978; Faigley, Witte, and Daly, 1981).

In the past researchers have tended to deal with high apprehensives and low apprehensives as two clearly definable subpopulations within the overall population of writers. Such researchers have particularly focused on attributes which tend to differentiate the highly apprehensive from others who are less apprehensive (Boice, 1985; Daly and Hailey, 1985). But it is possible for two individuals to secure scores of 40 and 75 (or 26 and 78 for that matter), in which case both will be determined to be highly apprehensive. One wonders if there may be qualities, attitudes, or preconceptions that set such individuals apart even though they are highly apprehensive. One wonders if the characteristic individual who scores 85 is somehow different from the typical person who scores 125 even though both are low apprehensives.

It was hoped that this study with its two open-ended questions would provide insights into these differences. The majority of the students provided detailed and multifaceted answers to the open-ended questions indicating 34 things that "encourage them to write," 48 things that "they think keep them from writing," and 41 things that "they think could be done to make writing easier for them." After scoring of the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test had been completed, tally sheets were generated based on the responses that had been provided to the open-ended questions as they corresponded to each numerical score on the test. Some of the open-ended responses were judged to be isolated as they did not seem to correspond with any of the other responses. But in other cases clear patterns emerged.

Results

The most recurring comment among the most apprehensive students, the bottom 3.5%, was that nothing encouraged them to write. The discouragement in these responses seemed almost absolute. This stood at marked contrast with the comments of the least apprehensive students, the top 5%, many of whom said that only paper and a writing instrument were necessary to encourage them to write. There is nothing surprising in this contrast. And it is not particularly surprising that 42% of those falling into the highly apprehensive range, below the score of 78, indicated that they write only when they are required to do so. But some of the other results are surprising.

Twenty-four and four-tenths percent (24.1%) of those whose apprehension scores fell between 41 and 78 (i.e. all the high apprehensives excluding the bottom 3.5%), indicated that they enjoy writing to their friends. This is a much higher percentage than the less apprehensive students, only 9.9% of whom specifically indicated that they enjoyed letter writing.

Thirty-six percent (36%) of those whose apprehension scores fell between 71 and 78 indicated that they enjoy writing for themselves as in diaries, journal writing, and personal poetry. This percentage far exceeded that of any other group of respondents.

Forty and nine-tenths percent (40.9%) of those whose scores fell between 61 and 111 indicated that interesting or relevant subject matter was important. But no one whose scores fell either below 61 or above 111 mentioned subject matter.

The seven students whose scores fell between 36 and 39 all indicated that negative evaluations kept them from writing. And throughout the range of the highly apprehensive writers, 54.4% mentioned critical evaluations as the primary factor that kept them from writing. In fact, this was a theme that was abundantly evident in the responses of all the students whose scores were 104 or below although it was mentioned less and less as the level of apprehension decreased.

As the comments about critical evaluation began to taper off other themes emerged. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of those whose scores fell between 61 and 69 expressed discomfort with a sense of not knowing what to write about. And 26.3% of those whose scores fell between 61 and 78 expressed feelings of insecurity about their grammar, while 13.5% of those whose scores fell between 90 and 99 felt that page requirements and specified lengths kept them from writing. But the most notable contrast was that as complaints about critical evaluations began to decrease another factor's inhibiting influence began to emerge with greater and greater frequency. Nineteen and seven-tenths percent (19.7%) of those whose scores fell between 61 and 78, 22.6% of those whose scores fell between 79 and 99, and 64.4% of those whose scores were above 99 indicated that writing was too time consuming. None of those whose scores were below 39 cited time as an inhibiting factor. Students at all levels indicated that more and better practice was necessary if they were to improve. But the highly apprehensive expressed it most strongly with 47.3% of those whose scores fell between 41 and 78 so indicating.

In contrast with the earlier referenced comments about critical evaluations, 19.8% of those whose scores fell between 61 and 104 indicated a need for better feedback about problems coupled with more encouragement. Twenty percent (20%) of those whose scores fell between 90 and 104 felt that training in business or report writing would make the process of writing easier for them.

Discussion

The flavor of deep sincerity emerges from these responses and one is touched by a strain that moves through the student responses to the open-ended questions: these people—particularly the highly apprehensive ones—genuinely want to be helped. They want to grow to be more skilled and capable. They are also very frustrated by their own perceived shortcomings and a system which does not deliver as much as it seems to promise.

The comments also strike a common chord with much of the research that has been done in the past.

Janet Emig's 1971 findings on the value of reflexive as opposed to extensive writing (i.e. the value of letter writing and personal writing as opposed to conventional academic writing), would seem to have particular applicability to highly apprehensive writers.

Apprehensive writers should also be encouraged to follow their inclinations to engage in journal writing and other forms of personal writing. Related activities that have been proven to be effective in reducing writing apprehension such as nutshelling (Flower, 1981), invisible writing (Marcus, 1983), and freewriting (Elbow, 1973) should also be encouraged.

Most students need to have a clearer sense of the relevance of the subjects they are dealing with and, if possible, also need to exercise some decision making in choosing subjects they can write about (Smith, 1984).

The results of this research would also seem to be consistent with the findings of Daly and Shamo (1978) which have shown that highly apprehensive students are reluctant to major in subjects that they anticipate will involve writing. But the student responses to the open-ended questions of this study seem to indicate that this reluctance is rooted in fear of critical evaluation of their writing. Teachers may intend for their commentaries to be constructive and helpful but highly apprehensive students tend to perceive such evaluations as undermining their confidence and discouraging their future efforts. Supplementary research in this area is necessary to clearly establish the dimensions of the impact that negative evaluations have on highly apprehensive writers.

What is clear from this research is that it is extremely important for teachers to commit themselves to the creation and maintenance of a positive academic environment. It is easy for evaluators to concentrate on what is wrong with student composition while all but taking for granted that which is right. Teachers need to dwell on positive aspects of virtually every student composition, emphasizing progress and the possibilities of future successes instead of reinforcing expectations of failure, or at least expectations of negative responses.

Perhaps most importantly teachers need to see students as individuals who very much want to overcome their shortcomings but who find themselves in difficult positions. To ask a student who is highly apprehensive to behave as if he or she were somehow different is not a realistic expectation. Teachers need to endeavor to help students as they are and not as teachers wish they were.

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